

DOUKENIE BABAYANIE BACOS

Oral History: EDITED VERSION

Birth Date: December 18, 1904.

Interview EI-049 by Paul E. Sigrist, Jr. on May 23, 1991

Immigrated from Thrace, Turkey, at the age of 15.

Arrived January 5, 1921 on the *King Alexander* from Piraeus, Greece.

Since 1973, the **Oral History Project** at **Ellis Island Immigration Museum** has interviewed over 2000 immigrants. Oral histories are interviews where all sorts of people, from factory workers to movie stars, tell *their* stories in their own words.

As you read, **answer the questions** in the boxes below. You will discuss them later in class. Think about what materials, skills and personality traits might be needed for a **successful immigration experience**.

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. We are here on Ellis Island with Doukenie Bacos [**doo-KEH-nee BAH-kos**], a Turkish subject who left from [Thrace, near modern Greece and Bulgaria] in 1919 when she was fifteen years old. [**NOTE:** *This is an error. She left December 22, 1920 and arrived January 5, 1921.*] Where were you born?

BACOS: I was born in [a town called] Saranda Klisse. The name today is Kirk Klisse. The Turks, when they chased all the Greeks out of Saranda Klisse they named it Kirk Klisse. [Currently named Kirklareli, Turkey.]



Doukenie (third from left)

SIGRIST: May I ask you, geographically, where does this town lie? Where on the map? Did you say it was in Thrace before?

BACOS: Thrace. In Thrace. [Northwestern part of Turkey, near the capital Istanbul, which was formerly known as Constantinople. Thrace lies in the continent of Europe, separate from the rest of Turkey.]

SIGRIST: What was the town like? What was it like? What did the town look like?

BACOS: Those days, all the whole town [had] forty thousand people—Turks, Greeks, Jewish and Bulgarians. We were mixed. (sighs) The Turks are not very progressive. The Greek life was very horrible. We used to live all the time in fear. Many times they used to try to steal girls so that they can turn them to Turks, and the Greeks are very religious. The Turks have different religion. They're Mohammedans [Moslems]. Greeks are [Christian] Orthodox. So always we lived in fear. You hear that they steal girls.

But when, in 1912, started the First World War, it started from Bulgaria. The Bulgarians marched in my country, and we thought Bulgarians would remain there. Being that they were

Christians, we had hopes maybe we'd live a little bit better. But they stayed only nine months. We suffered a lot from Bulgarians, too. In nine months they got all out and the Turks come back. This was around '15, '16. The Turks, when they used to sell us bread, they used to mix bread with sand, just to kill us. In school, they closed the schools for a while, and we couldn't go. But my father was very smart, and he was a self-made man. He used to teach us at home. Meanwhile, the Greeks came to my town, and they stayed only two years. In two years [the Turks returned] again, all the Greeks had to leave town and go scatter in Greece.

What ethnicity was Doukenie? What other ethnic groups lived in her hometown?

Doukenie accused the Turks of doing several things. List three.

Doukenie did not witness the acts she says the Turks did to them, such as stealing girls. Would this stand up in a court of law? Why or why not?

[There] were only two little girls in the family. It's an honor to have a boy in the family, because the family is going to inherit the name. And many times I used to hear my father talking with my mother. "We have two beautiful girls. Only if we had a boy." [How were they] going to get help some day when [they] get older, because usually the boy take[s] care of the responsibilities of the family? As young as I was, I used to feel for my father and I used to tell him, "Don't worry, Dad. Someday I'll become your son, and I'm going to help you. Don't worry about the future."

Another thing used to hurt me a lot. [My parents] would take us to church every Sunday. And while we're walking friends from far away, they would see [us], and they would say [to my father], "Hey, Babayanie, your daughter is growing. Is going to be good for my son. But [then your] house is going to be mine." Father was well established. He had three houses. And that used to hurt me a lot. [My father] used to say [to me], "Don't worry, dear. God gave me two girls. God will provide for everything. You just don't worry." I used to think at night, "Someday I have to go to America. I have to prove it. I have to become somebody so I can help my father."

Many times I used to go and see my aunt. Her daughter was well-married. And she put false teeth on her. And my father didn't have teeth. He didn't have money. And I used to say, "Auntie, can I see your teeth? Because some day I'm going to buy teeth for my father." That's how much I loved my father. I'll tell you. I don't know how much you believe in God, but believe in God. If God wants things to happen, [they] will happen. If He doesn't want, all, regardless how much you'll try, you won't be able to do it.

I was a very smart girl, and I was jumping classes. I [also] used to love to get American books [and] magazines, just to see how they lived. I used to see other people [who] used to come to America, and they used [to return] to help fix their [family's] house, help their parents, help their sisters and brothers.

SIGRIST: What did you expect out of America? What were your expectations?

BACOS: First I wanted freedom, because we weren't free there. The way I used to read books [about America], it was free life, hard life maybe. Oh, sometimes they used to write that they

used to find money in the street, and I could never believe that. I was too intelligent to hear stories like this. But while I was going to school always I used to tell my friends, classmates, “I’m going to go to America. I’m not going to stay here. There is no progress here.” What you are, you used to remain the same way. There wasn’t foresight, there wasn’t dreams to develop. The rich people remain rich. The poor people remain poor. It wasn’t a chance for the poor people. I couldn’t take it. I couldn’t take that. We used to say that the doors from America are open, and [you] can come freely.

Why was it important to have a boy in Greek families? What does Doukenie seem to think of this part of her culture?

What did she mean when she told her father, “Someday I’ll become your son?” (She does not mean it literally.)

What did she mean when she said, “There is no progress here [in Thrace]”?

Finally, in 1918, a man came and knocked [on] my door and I opened the door. And he said, “Where is your mother?” My mother had a brother in America that [she had lost track of]. I went and called my mother and [the man] said, “I brought you a letter from your brother.” He opened the letter and found a check for twenty-five dollars. At that time in 1918 it was a lot of money, twenty-five dollars. She was so happy. Not for the money, but that he was alive.

So in a few days I wrote [my uncle] a letter and I said to him, to thank him first for the money, and told him [about] my dream: I love to get out from here. I’m growing, Father will never be able to send me to Constantinople. After you finish the high school in Kirk Klisse, you have to go to Constantinople to finish. There we had to pay the teachers. But after the war, Father wasn’t so rich like before. So I wrote everything, and I said, “If you only give me a chance to bring me to America to finish my schooling, because I hear in America are free.”

My uncle, I found out later, the same night that he got the letter, he was a gambler, a heavy gambler. He said, “We’ll play one ticket for my niece.” And he won. He said, “Another play for the expenses.” And he won. I went to my father, oh, when I got the letter and the ticket in one month, I was so excited. And I went to my mother and I said, “Help. My ticket came.” And she was happy. When my father came back from work, I said, “Father, I got a ticket to go to America.” Every night that I was going to sleep, I would dream, anything I used to read, I would dream how I’m going to find America, how I’m going to go, how I’m going to try to become like the others, be somebody.

SIGRIST: So you were very anxious to get out of where you were.

BACOS: I was anxious. I wanted justice. I wanted a different life. I’ll tell you. When my father came, I said to Father, “I got my tickets.” Three days I was begging him and I was telling him, “Dad, trust me. Trust me, Dad. Just let me. Give me a chance.”

He says, “Never a child of mine will go away from my arms. I went to Bulgaria and I know what I went through. Child, fifteen year old, never.” [Before Doukenie was born] My father had established a good business in Bulgaria, and he left his brother [in charge of the business] to see

his mother. His brother sold [the] business, [took] the money, and left. When my father went back they told him, “Your brother sold the business. He got everything.”

Meanwhile, I heard, around the corner was another family. And I heard that Effie got her tickets [for her] mother, son and daughter, to come to America. Without saying anything to my father or mother I went to my friend's house, and I said, “Effie, I heard you're going to America. Can you take me with you? I got my tickets, too.” Of course, Gregory, the brother, said to me, “Please, dear, Effie, let's [have Doukenie come with us]. We're going to have fun on the road.” And she said, “Okay, we'll take you.” This way I was secure that I was with family. I go back to my father and I ask him, “Would you allow me to go with [the] Floridis family?” He thought and thought, and then he said, “Well, all right, as long as you're going with a family and not alone.”

And then he took me aside and gave me a lot of advice, and then at the end he said, “I know you're going to be desperate. One thing I'm asking you. Don't ever dirty my forehead. Don't ever let any man touch your hand. But, I'd rather see you drown than come back.” I said, “Dad, you have nothing to worry about. Just give me the chance to go.” Thinking that I'm going to come here, and I'll find everything the way I was dreaming, but it wasn't like this.

How did her letter to her uncle change Doukenie's life?

At first, Doukenie's father did not let her leave. What is the source of *conflict*, or disagreement? How did Doukenie solve this conflict?

What did her father mean when he told her, “Don't ever dirty my forehead”?

The day we got the train, the whole town was in the station to say goodbye. The door closed, and everybody was saying goodbye with their handkerchiefs. I looked at them, and I said, “Where am I going? What courage I have to start? Will I be able to do it?” And again, I said, “Well, you were asking yourself, you're asking God to give you the opportunity. Now you are on your own feet. You have to go through. You promise and you have to go through.”

My money weren't enough. When we came to Athens, we were living in a very poor hotel, in one room, the mother and daughter and the brother and me. The others went and signed their papers, their passports. Me, they didn't accept me because I was too young. I was desperate. From Athens we went to Piraeus. [The others] said to me, “What are you going to do?”

Next day early, I stood outside of the door, all alone. I don't know where I was finding this courage. Well, the man that came, the first man, to open the door, I hold his jacket and I said, “Please, mister. Mister, help me.” I went in, and I [told] him my story, that I have to go to America. I can't go back again. The whole dream that I had to go to school, it was America. “Please help me.” [While] I was talking, a man from Crete [came in]. He said, “Give me your papers,” and he signed the papers. So I came back. We had to wait forty days in that little room for the King Alexander because they had to make alterations. Time came, we got the King Alexander. It was a beautiful boat.

SIGRIST: Where were your accommodations on the boat? Where did you sleep?

BACOS: I slept with them, in one room. They were four decks. But after the mother got very sick, and instead of second class they wanted to, because they had money, they moved to first class, better cabin, and they brought [me to] where I was [with the] other three girls. Always I used to go to the deck and play mandolin. A few more girls found me, and they saw me. They said, “Why we can't play?” So we used to play.

Meanwhile, a Greek fellow was traveling, and he came one day and he said, it took thirteen days to come to America. He said, “Little one, do you know any other girls that they play mandolin?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “I'm thinking, being that the boat is for the first time traveling in America, I'm thinking to give a dance so that they can remember King Alexander. I'm going to give you some notes, and I want you to be up on the stage.” Ooh, I was so happy because I stood up on the stage. So the night came. We play[ed].

SIGRIST: So you were on the boat thirteen days. Was it a rough trip? Did you get sick?

BACOS: No, no. It was a beautiful boat, beautiful. When we came here, so happy that I am in America now. I saw the Statue of Liberty. And I said to myself, “Lady, you're such a beautiful. You opened your arms, and you get all the foreigners here. Give me a chance to prove that I am worth it, to do something, to become somebody in America.” Always that statue was in my mind. When I passed in front of this statue I was so enthusiastic. [But] After we got the boat to come to Ellis Island, they started mumbling about me. And I heard two elderly girls, and they said, “Maybe they're going to send you back.” Because already they heard that I was coming to my uncle, and I was underage.

Why didn't the authorities give her a passport?

What did she do to get on board ship to go to America?

Why did she fear that she would be sent back by immigration officials at Ellis Island?

SIGRIST: Tell us what it was like to stay here for three days.

BACOS: My dear boy, I saw tears. I saw tears with happiness, but I saw tears with pain. They had to wait here, and they were living in an agony. Next to me [there] was an Italian woman with three children, and one of the child got sick. It was pneumonia. The child was coughing. And she was holding the child and singing. And all of a sudden, a doctor and two nurses came to take the child away. Now, she didn't know how to speak [English]. They're talking to her [In English]. After [a while] I realized what they were saying, that the child has to go to the hospital. And they took the child from her arms, and she was crying, because it's not easy to take your child without knowing what they're doing. I was crying with her, too.

As I said, I saw many people, [who] were waiting, and then the parents came, or the brothers came, and they were so happy. And me, I was remaining back. For me, it was just like very hard, small road with thorns. Would I be able to pass those thorns and get out to go to America, or they have to set me back again? I cry. I cry all night.

SIGRIST: You must have been very frightened.

BACOS: [But] I had courage. I had real courage, and I was praying. I was praying so hard. They gave us food. There were big men that always, in the morning, [tell us], “Come on, come on.” It was Irish people who were guards. And they used to go, “Come on, come on.” Like lambs we used to go upstairs to the rooms to sleep. But still, the pain was in me. I couldn't enjoy nothing, being that I was afraid they were going to send me back. I was dreaming if they send me back, before I go to the other boat, I'm going to fall into the river and die. I couldn't go back any more. I had dreams. I promise everybody that someday I'm going to come back and you'll see me different.

Finally, the third day, they came to take me. The agent said, “Don't worry. You're going to go to the island, and from there your uncle is going to come and pick you. But never mention anything [about being] underage.” They investigated that he was a bachelor, and I wasn't allowed to go into bachelor's hands alone, and he had to find a family to place me there. The same night when we came my uncle comes with another woman. He said, “This is your aunt.” Usually the Greeks, to a strange woman they call “aunt.” “You're going to stay with them.” He was helping. But [for] three days I had to stay here.

What was the real reason that immigration officials did not let her uncle take her off Ellis Island right away?

What did she mean when she said that “the pain was in me” during her time at Ellis Island?

How did her uncle solve the conflict with immigration officials so he could get Doukenie off the island?

My uncle, as I said, he was a gambler. He didn't have a lot of money. We came by subway to go to the house. A whole week, I think it was Christmas week, I didn't go out. Finally, a week later, the [woman] I used to call aunt said to me, “We're going to go and visit somebody.” I said, “Do they have girls?” She said, “No, but they have boys.” In fact, from that day, any place we used to go, they would invite me. Usually the Greeks makes dances. Every weekend you'll go to a Greek dance.

When we opened the door I saw one big table, around about seven boys. A boy [was sitting] on top [of a] laundry tub. The minute he saw me, he said, “This spring chicken will be for me.” Everybody started laughing. He was already five years in America. These were the first English words that I learned: “This spring chicken will be for me.” I was embarrassed because I thought something is wrong with me.

Now I started to go to school. I spoke good French, and I could immediately pick the words, the English, only with French accent. But in no time I start to progress. The first day they put me in the eighth class. Problems, I could do. But the books that they gave me I couldn't read.

One day, my uncle comes and says, “I won't be able to send you to school any more.” Already I

went to school three months. I said, “Why?” My dream was to come to America to go to school, to go to become a doctor and show my compatriots what I could do. He said, “I lost all my money. Ten thousand dollars in one night.” He gambled. I said, “Now what?” He said, “There are two ways. Either you have to go back, [or] you have to get married.”

[His friends] knew that he was broke. They were asking him, “What’s she going to do? Is she going to stay here, or is she going to go back?” Because those days the Greeks, they didn’t have Greek girls around, and they used to bargain [for brides]: “I have so much [money for a bride], I have so much.” So my uncle says, “There are many Greeks that they want to get married. Forty years old, fifty years old. They have business, they have four mink coats.”

I said, “Me, to sell myself? Never. I’d rather go back, I’d rather drown myself.” Never I had money in mind. But I managed to have money all the time. Give in to money, never.

What conflict did she have with her uncle at the end? What did she think of the choices he gave her?

In your opinion, how much should we trust what the uncle told her? Why *did* he pay for her ticket to the US? Think about it.

Predict how you think her conflict with her uncle ended. Did she have to marry one of her uncle’s friends? Did she ever get to become a doctor?

Unlike most oral histories taken at Ellis Island, which tell an entire life story, Doukenie’s story suddenly stops here. However, by contacting her descendents, we have discovered what happened to her! Based on what you have learned about Doukenie from her story, what do you think she would have done? (Classes who visit the NPNH Education Center on Staten Island will find out the answer.)



GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

NAME of immigrant: **DOUKENIE BACOS**

FROM: _____

YEAR she came to the US: _____

AGE upon arrival: _____

PUSH-PULL: Why did she choose to leave home and come to America?

BECAUSE:

